HARPER'S WEEKLY, **January 28, 1911**

The "Snake."

By HARRY BEDWELL.

THE trainmaster had just told the superintendent that he'd be hanged if he didn't believe trainmen were degenerating into milksops, when someone came in and asked if anyone had seen the trainmaster. The two men glanced up at the heavy shouldered man who was looking at them out of quick, narrow eyes.

The trainmaster said, "Well?"

"Do you need any stingers?" In this way the man made formal application for position as brakeman.

The trainmaster took stock of him from his blood red face to his heelless shoes, and saw a great absence of the milksop. He was too good for a brakeman, the official decided.

"I can use you as a snake," he made answer, thus formally offering him a job as switchman.

"All right," said the stranger. "Give me an application blank."

They gave him blanks, and for two hours he sat humped over a desk, scrawling painfully. Then he told the trainmaster his name was Keeney, and asked what he should do.

"You'll have about time to get something to eat before you report to Mr. Bailey, the yardmaster. "You'll go to work to-night," the trainmaster said, and Keeney strode out eagerly to find the yard office.

Half an hour later, a little after sunset, he came into the yard office and demanded of the first man his eyes fell upon where the yardmaster was. Keeney did not know till later that the man he questioned was one Holden by name, who had charge of one of the night switch crews, and who was a slave-driving, hotheaded devil of a man.

The aggressiveness in Keeney's tone stirred Holden's sensitive wrath. He bit off the end of a penholder with his answer.

"It's none of your damn business! Get out of here! This office ain't for the public."

He glanced up with that, then got quickly to his feet, for he saw the narrow eyes of Keeney turn green in the half-light.

The click of the telegraph instruments was the only sound in the room for a few seconds.

"You'd better say where the yardmaster is." Keeney's voice barely ruffled the quiet, but Holden bunched himself.

"You go plumb straight to —"

The two were at each other, not warily and cunningly as men who fear pain, but with the savage eagerness of soft-footed jungle beasts. Their heavy fists whipped in blows that took away the flesh where they struck, and low snarls shook their battling bodies. Both were big, full-blooded men who came of a fighting profession, and both found joy in the battle.

Bailey, the yardmaster, came in a little later on his way home, and found half his office a wreck, with two bloody men springing at each other over the wreckage. Two yard clerks and a telegraph operator were perched high on top of a file-case, screaming down advice at

the top of their voices. One of them had switched on all the electric lamps to give better fighting light.

Bailey was himself a big man. He pulled the two fighting men apart and cursed them bitterly till they ceased trying to be at each other.

“What the devil are you doing here, anyway?" he finished, eyeing Keeney.

The switchman blinked his narrow eyes as if trying to remember.

“Trainmaster sent me down to go to work." He was still breathing heavily, and he spat blood with his answer.

Bailey's eyebrows went up, then down again abruptly, pinching together in a frown of decision.

“It's past time you fellows were at work," he snapped as he turned them toward the door. “Holden, this fellow is to go on your crew. Break him in to-night."

The two took lanterns and walked away down through the yards together. Each had been mauled half to death by the other, but both walked briskly with a clean swing of feet.

"You needn't have taken it so damned hard," growled Holden as they neared their engine. “Wasn't you never cussed before?"

“Never by a man who couldn't do a better job of it than you can," Keeney answered, softly.

Holden climbed on the engine.

"Take her away, he ordered, sullenly, of the engineer, and they clanged swiftly through the yards to begin work.

It was a heartbreaking night for the new switchman. Holden's heavy fist had done punishing work along his left side and forearm. Moreover, the yard was new to him and was a difficult one to master. For it broke in the middle from comparatively level ground to a patchy grade. Half-way over the hillside toward the river it sprawled, and from there the main line wound away alone down the valley and through the hills on the other side.

At their midnight lunch, Holden and the engineer told Keeney stories of cars that ran away down the steep sidings, and of the maneuvers they went through when they struck the derailing switch.

"Sometimes they'll jump into the air like a big-bellied frog," was the way Holden put it, "and sometimes they'll lay right down to the ground and roll over."

"Did you ever let any cars get away down the main line?' asked Keeney, his narrow eyes on the main-line track glinting down the steep grade under the stars.

Holden and the engineer looked away from each other.

"Yes," said Holden, "we did."

"What happened?" insisted Feeney.

Holden spoke slowly.

"That last green light down the main line there is a derailing switch. It's just beyond the last side track. There's a big ditch just there — a damn nice place to pile up cars in.

"We let a string of box-cars get away down the main line one night. A switchman broke his leg trying to catch 'em. Barney Gregg, the night yardmaster, caught the cars before they got to going so all-fired fast, and might have stopped them before they got into anything coming up the hill. But some one popped up at that derailing switch and turned the whole lot over into the ditch. We couldn't find enough of Barney to bury decently."

In the nights that followed, Keeney mastered the treacherous yard. There was never a switchman quicker than he, and with his heavy shoulders and long arms he could twist a

brake till the shoes bit and screamed, and stopped cars on the steepest grades. He knew every daring trick of the profession, every long chance that would gain time.

Under warm, hazy stars, in soft moonlight, or in slanting, wind-driven rain, lightning raced through the sky, over the steel rails, and fussed and fumed about the telegraph instruments, in the yard office, he kept the hard pace set by slave-driver Holden.

He would spring eagerly at wildly careening cars, and be on top in a swift scramble. From end to end of the yard his lantern swung and tossed incessantly in quick, clear signals.

They would tear a freight-train apart savagely, then put another together again. Hoarse above the crash of cars would come Holden's roar of "*Ho*-old 'em!" and Keeney would flash the signal to the engineer; then they would tear off to get more cars to paste to an outbound train.

In the fore part of the night, feeling the yard to get their bearings after the day crews had stirred it up. At the midnight lunch they planned the work that was yet to be done, and in the cool dawn they raced and fought with the stubborn cars that the yardmaster might not complain of them.

Once when the engineer, maddened by a baffling series of signals from Keeney's restless lantern, kicked a car into a siding so savagely that even the switchman's great strength could not stop it from crashing into a string of other cars, Holden lost his self-control for a second.

"What in hell are you doing, man!" he roared at Keeney. "Do you want to butt that string of cars into the river?" It was his nature to curse, not the offender, but the man nearest him.

Keeney peered down over the edge of the car, and Holden saw the narrow eyes turn green in the lantern-light. He turned away abruptly and strode toward the engine, for the sight of those eyes made him feel again the heavy, punishing fists of Keeney.

“Think I’ve put a man on with Holden that’ll hold him for a while,” the yardmaster told the trainmaster one evening. They stood just outside the flood of light from the yard-office door, watching the switch-engines race up and down, trying to keep cars on the move westward that they might have working room. For westbound freights were packing the sidings with cars and the power of the division was working overtime.

“There ain’t room enough in this yard to-night to whip a dog,” bit out Bailey, as a switch-engine pushing a string of cars came down the main line. “These fellows are overworked, and getting reckless. There’s Number Four coming up the valley, and here’s Holden pushing a string of cars out on to the main line right in her face. What’s he trying to do? And where’s Keeney?”

Number Four’s headlight painted a bright streak across a hilltop down in the river bottoms.

“I saw Keeney with a switch list going down the coal spur,” said the trainmaster. “Suppose Holden sent him to look for some cars.”

“Holden’s got no business out on the main line with Number Four so near,” growled the yardmaster. “He’s getting too — What the—“

The switch-engine was shooting the cars down the main line toward a siding to clear the way for Number Four. In front of the yard office a refrigerator-car bucked clear of the track and ploughed up a fountain of ties and cinders. The five box-cars ahead of the derailed refrigerator shot down the grade toward the end of the yard, the flanges of the wheels whining spitefully against the rails. For Holden had taken time to connect the air in the

string of cars only just so far as the refrigerator, and when that car left the track it slipped it's couplings from the cars ahead.

Holden, on top of the five careening, shooting cars, felt one moment of heartsickness when he realized that he had taken one daring chance too many in not connecting the air on all the cars. Then he spun a brake tight and threw his weight against; but brake-shoes never bit so deep for him as they did for Keeney.

Down in the valley Number Four's whistle called up mournfully. She was not out of the hills as yet, and could not see the runaway cars shooting toward her.

Holden began to realize that alone he could not stop the cars from tearing up the passenger-train. He worked madly at the brakes, keeping his mind on just that for fear of panic. But the brakes did not seem to check the cars, and the increasing speed began to sicken Holden.

"He's done it!" yelled the yardmaster. "Look what he's done! In two minutes those cars will go through Number Four."

"Here, stand still!" snapped the trainmaster. "Get two switch-engines and make up two trains. Hitch the derrick on to one, and coaches on to the other. I'll get men rounded up to help. Wait a minute! What's that?" His hand shot out and pointed into the darkness.

A speck of light was just streaking across the lower end of the yard like a meteor in full flight. It seemed to take no account of ditches and fills, of cinder-piles and scrap-heaps, but swept along swiftly in a straight line.

The two men peered at the speck in puzzled silence. Then the yardmaster began to swing his arms about wildly.

"It's Keeney!" he screamed. "he's cut across from the coal spur to head 'em off." He clawed at the trainmaster, nearly pulling him out of his coat. "Run! Damn your long-legged heart, *run!*" he yelled at the flying speck of light.

"He's trying to get to the derailing switch before the cars do," gritted the trainmaster.

The yardmaster let go the other's coat suddenly.

"It's all day with Holden if he does," he said in a low voice. "It's about the same way Barney Gregg went, too. I wonder if Holden *sees* him?"

The yard had become quiet save for the roar of the runaway cars. Switch-engines stood breathing quietly, while the crews peered intently into the darkness, watching the race, their low-voiced comments barely breaking the stillness.

The speck of light swept up to the green light that marked the derailing switch, and stopped. The cars were almost on top of the two lights.

"He's made it," whispered the yardmaster, and looked to see the green light turn red as Keeney threw over the derail. But Keeney did not throw the switch.

"What's wrong with him now?" snapped the trainmaster.

Keeney's lantern raised a little in the air, then went out, shattered against the side of the first car.

The two men could not see, nor yet imagine, the heavy-shouldered switchman crouched at the side of the track, furiously pumping air into his lungs after his hard run, awaiting the avalanche of cars. He ran forward a little way with them as they came down upon him, his lantern raised that he might in its feeble light locate the iron steps of the first car. Then he sprang and clung and was swept along, his long arms almost torn from his body. The mass of cars whined on down the grade.

Keeney's huge bulk was outlined against the stars, swaying giddily with the lurch of the cars. Then the brake's shoes screamed under the twists he gave them.

A switch-engine clanged down a siding after the runaway cars. The yardmaster ran out on to the track and waved it down. He and the trainmaster swung aboard.

“Keeney is a fool — a great big long-legged fool!” the yardmaster relieved his harrowed feelings.

The two hung out of the cab-window as the engine clanked over the switches and rumbled down the hill. They saw the five cars come to a shuddering stop in the glare of Number Four’s headlight.

The switch-engine came up as Holden and Keeney slid to the ground from different cars. Holden was crazy mad.

“Why in hell didn’t you ditch ‘em?” he yelled at Keeney. “You could so damned easy have missed catching them.”

Then Holden shut up like a clam, swung around abruptly, and stamped back to the switch-engine, for he saw Keeney’s narrow eyes turn green in the light of Number Four’s engine. **Ω**